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Power, Play and Pedagogy through the PowerPoint Performance-Lecture

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Abstract

What could a visual-led approach to the learning and teaching of complex issues look like for a short online synchronous session? Through a playful performance-lecture exploring concepts in diversity, interdisciplinarity and social change entitled What could a neurodiversity-led 2050 look like?, this paper outlines the possibilities of visual-centred approach, using the ubiquitous Microsoft software PowerPoint (or open-sourced equivalents like Google Slides and Prezi). It seeks to contribute to discourses and practices around role of visual approaches in Higher Education (HE) to address 'difficult' topics like power and inequality in an engaging manner, and to empower learners as active participants, including those who may be think visually, such as dyslexic learners. Such approaches will be urgent in a reality characterised by profound socio-political injustice highlighted by Black Lives Matter (BLM), and amid a global pandemic, where teaching occurs online, and where learners and teachers alike may be short of time, attention and resources. Highlighting techniques and perspectives from art, film and neurodiversity, it invites the consideration of the PowerPoint performance-lecture as a simple yet engaging and responsive process for higher order learning and creative thinking. A secondary point of the article to call for HE to itself apply a degree of critical and creative thinking about its own position, to use self-knowledge to do better, in order to move forward. It welcomes feedback and challenges, and calls for the creation of yet more playful, innovative, visual-led approaches in the learning and teaching of complex issues in Higher Education.

1. Introduction

What could a visual-led approach to the learning and teaching of complex issues look like for an online synchronous session? Through a playful performance-lecture exploring concepts in diversity, interdisciplinarity and social change that I presented recently, What could a neurodiversity-led 2050 look like? (hereafter

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2050), this paper outlines the possibilities of visual-centred approach, using the ubiquitous Microsoft software PowerPoint (or open-sourced equivalents like Google Slides and Prezi). I will distribute the slides throughout the article to punctuate this discussion (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Slide 1 of What could a neurodiversity-led 2050 look like? (Tan 2020d)



The component images have been performed, photographed, then manipulated by the author.

I seek to contribute to discourses and practices around role of visual approaches in Higher Education (HE) to address 'difficult' topics like power and inequality in an engaging manner, and to empower learners as active participants, including those who may think visually, such as dyslexic learners. Such approaches will be urgent in a reality characterised by profound socio-political injustice highlighted by Black Lives Matter (BLM), and amid a global pandemic, where teaching occurs online, and where learners and teachers alike may be short of time, attention and resources. Highlighting techniques and perspectives from art, film and neurodiversity, I invite the consideration of the PowerPoint performance-lecture as a simple yet engaging and responsive process for higher order learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976) and creative thinking, requiring the application of 'multiple theories and concepts', 'a variety of skills, techniques and methods' and 'using self-knowledge and personal cognition' (Hanna, 2007: 9-10). A secondary point of the article to call for HE to itself apply a degree of critical and creative thinking about its own position, to use self-knowledge to do better, in order to move forward.

I welcome feedback and challenges, and call for the creation of yet more playful, innovative, visual-led approaches in the learning and teaching of complex issues in HE.

2. The visual in HE: an inferior and illegitimate cousin to words?

Globalisation and digitisation have led to the 'visual turn' in the last twenty years, which has profoundly transformed communication (Roberts, 2017). This affirms the power and poetry of the imagery that can enhance or surpass spoken or written words (Figure 2). Emojis—cute ideograms that originated on Japanese mobile phone in the 1990's—now speak the thousands of words that we struggle to use to convey our emotions (Stark and Crawford, 2015). Revolutions are being plotted across images and short texts: for example, the use of Twitter during the Arab Spring (Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess, 2013) and WhatsApp during the 'Umbrella Revolution' (Lee, So, and Leung, 2015). The photograph of Alan Kurdi washed ashore became an iconic symbol for the migrant crisis, causing a global surge of sympathy and rise in charity donation (Ibrahim, 2018).

Figure 2: Slide 9 from 2050 (Tan 2020d)



The photograph is of the autistic climate activist Greta Thunberg (Hellberg 2018).

Yet, already notoriously reluctant to respond to social change (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020) but swift to defend its identity or status when it feels threatened (Sian, 2019), HE could be said to remain largely indifferent to multimedia learning (MML). According to Mayer (2014, preface), "multimedia learning, or learning from words and images, has developed into a coherent discipline with a significant research base". Graphs, photographs, video clips and more most certainly grace our textbooks, Moodle, Blackboards and Zoom. Platforms like Powerpoint have been around for decades, a quick Google Scholar search on 'multimedia learning' returns 3,450,000 results, and the longevity of a journal like Visual Communication, which has been around since 2002, confirms that the visual is firmly in HE.

Nonetheless, questions about the status of the visual within learning and teaching remain. In a largely logocentric culture within HE, aren't words – written and spoken – the lingua franca, not visual language? Could MML be considered a 'bolt-on', inferior to text, or regarded as resource-intensive (requiring more time, copyright clearance and more) or, at worst, not taken as a legitimate, formal pedagogical approach (Roberts, 2018)? If visual language pull its own weight in the HE sphere, why must every image used be translated and explained into words, via caption or as reference within bodies of text, for them to have any legs, and are other dismissed as standalones? This is despite how, activated in representative, metaphorical or 'paradoxical' ways, images have been proven to have the capacity to support discussion, and convey meaning and engagement around the learning and teaching of complex subjects, including politics in the global south, peace and conflict studies and international history (Roberts, 2017). Visual tools can be a short cut to play and metaphor, which is known to nurture higher order learning and creative thinking by encouraging reflecting, opening up and sharing (Nerantzi, 2018), and provides the learner with insights into complex situations, the understanding of self and others (Marton and Säljö, 1976). Studies have shown that, although visual tools do not improve student performances significantly, students prefer image-based slides, and understand better with the use of visual tools (Bartsch and Cobern, 2003). Yet, HE continues to miss the trick.

3. Tricky Topics

If HE is insecure about a non-threat like MML, it is not difficult to gauge its level of angst in the face of the ongoing, terrible twin of wicked problems: the Covid-19 pandemic and Black Live Matters movement (BLM), and the larger issue of inequality and injustice.

UK HE is racist. This is well-established (e.g. Adomako Ampofo, 2016; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020, Sian, 2019). Priding themselves as 'liberal' and 'post-racial' universities perpetuate "patterns of privilege" that are "structured by whiteness", inflicting micro and macro-aggressions to staff and students of colour (Sian, 2019). It took the scale and gravity of the 2020 BLM – sparked by 8 minutes and 46 seconds of moving images of George Floyd's killing – to force some universities to act. A few have admitted that they "haven't always got it right" (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019: 37), while others have devised imaginative PR moves (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020).

But if UK HE didn't want to address racism pre-Covid-19, the global economic recession and socio-political volatility – Brexit, anyone? – provide great cover for many to resist, ignore or deny the call for diversity. Which is why academics and students of colour as well as allies continue to apply pressure, particularly through social media platforms, given social-distancing rules in UK. Twitter, for instance, has been an effective public stage for people to call out on institutions' past and historical wrongdoings (Adomako Ampofo, 2016; BBC News, 2020; Haynes and Bazner, 2019), or to bring visibility – literally – to 'black excellence in neuro-fields' with crowd-sourced selfies by black neuroscientists in #BlackinNeuro. Each selfie or emoji in each tweet – or, for that matter, WhatsApp message or Instagram post – presents a readymade teaching goldmine to trigger discourse, invite contemplation and debate in the online classroom.

But what I wish to discuss is a simpler, 'old school' and even bland MML tool – the PowerPoint, which has entered offices and classrooms since 1987 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020) – for an online audience, through an example of a recent commission.

4. Playing with Power Structure using the PowerPoint

On 9 July, I presented 2050 on Zoom. This was part of Virtual Coffeehouse Conversation: Neurodiversity and the Future of Work (Tan, 2020d). The invitation was a result of a well-received op-ed I wrote, on artistic and neurodivergent leadership in the Covid-19 recovery (2020b), and was organised by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). Set up in 1847, the RSA is an organisation committed to finding practical solutions to social challenges. I have been a Fellow since 2014, and past Fellows include Charles Dickens, Benjamin Franklin, Karl Marx and Tim Berners-Lee. The session was attended by up to 130 people at a point. RSA Fellows aside, they include academics in Higher Education and theatre, curators, PhD students in neuroscience, activists in neurodiversity, media artists, neurodivergent technologists. The 60-minute event featured another speaker, and each of our 10-minute presentation was followed by discussions in breakout rooms, and a final open forum.

Figure 3: Slide 8 of 2050 (Tan 2020d)



The source image of the medal is a photograph of the OBE medal (Empire Medals 2020) The other photographs are by team members of the project #MagicCarpet (Tan 2017).

Across 12 slides, I shared eight visions of the future. This was my creative, neurodivergent and decolonised interpretation and interrogation of RSA's own outline of the future. Situated in the year 2050, my version celebrates – not ignore or punish – people with 'non-standard' cognitive, communication and learning modes, including those with dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), autism and more, and how these intersects with race, class and gender. 2050 is snappy – fast-paced, as well as irritated and impatient with the socio-political injustices and hungry for change. Satirical and absurd, it is also angry and hopeful. Instead of OBE/MBE/CBE ('Haven't we had enough of the empire?', I asked), I urged for NDE – NeuroDiversity medals of Excellence (Figure 3). By the next generation, HE should also finally stop failing or boring people with divergent learning approaches. Instead, it will reward interdisciplinarity and intellectual promiscuity with MASc and PhDs. Rather than penalising those who can't read or write, or who cannot sit still, we will celebrate the next generations of Leonardo Da Vinci-s, whose dyslexia and ADHD are behind his prolificacy and polymathy (eg Catani and Mazzarello 2019; Røssstad 2002; Mangione and Maestro 2019). I also suggested that, in 30 years' time, 'neurodiversity' will also be truly diversified, and we will stop using the excuse of the fight against ableism and neuro-normativity to perpetuate white privilege, racism and elitism, but celebrate people in all shades and interpretations, identifications and presentations of neurodiversities.

Reactions were highly-positive (Figure 4). Feedback in the form of 12 tweets, 6 emails and live chat reveal that concepts learnt invited further reflection and evaluation of issues around workplace discrimination, racism, and systemic change. There were also 4 new subscriptions to a network I co-lead on neurodiversity, an invitation to repeat the presentation, and another to be Co-Principal Investigator for an interdisciplinary funding bid on neurodiversity in adolescents to the Medical Research Council.

Figure 4: Screenshots of tweets, emails and live chat, in response to the RSA presentation, and the repeated performance at University of Reading (2020).



5. The Performance-Lecture

Drawing on pedagogy, performance art, theatre, protest art and activism, and co-opting the conventions and materialities of the classroom (such as blackboard, chalk, slide projector, podium, and even students, as well as performers assuming the role of student), various forms of the performative pedagogy, 'performance-lecture' or 'lecture-performance', have been around as an artistic device since at least the 1970's (Firunts, 2016). Exposing and critiquing the mechanisms and politics of the traditional lecture format and, more generally, how knowledge is constructed and communicated, and aligned with the art historical tradition of performance art, the performance-lecture, which is the term that I will use here, can be understood as not 'just' a lecture, but a mode of meta-lecture that is highly self-reflexive. Blurring the lines between disciplines, and between art and discourse about art, the most interesting instances are those on institutional critique, and are created by artists also believe in power of learning and teaching for socio-political change (Milder, 2011).

I have used, and abused, the performance-lecture format as an artist, teacher and researcher since 2004. Through crafting a series of image-centred slides to spoken words across time, I aim to persuade, provoke, confuse, amuse and bemuse. Rather than to explain, represent or illustrate, I often use images in metaphorical or paradoxical ways.

This draws on my artistic and curatorial practice in filmmaking specialising in the 'cine-essay', which can be described broadly as a poetic, creative-non-fictional format blending autobiography, socio-political critique and storytelling, with roots in 1920s Marxist filmmaking and montage (Tan, 2008). I am also informed by the phenomena of the 'laptop performance', where a computer and what it shows on a screen are the key tools and props for an otherwise, deliberately deadpan and detached bodily presence by the performer common in the electronic band Kraftwerk in the 1970's, through to 'laptop orchestras' of Tokyo in the 2000s, which I was also a part of (Tan, 2004). It was a live performance-lecture by Walid Raad, a Lebanese-American artist and academic that I experienced in 2003 that convinced me to begin using PowerPoint as an artistic medium. Raad's artful appropriation of the aesthetics of the lecture (lamp, table, laptop in a darkened space with the illuminated Apple logo, and even folders in his laptop), in a trademark aloofness and authority as he analysed the Lebanese civil war, was chillingly disturbing as it was laugh-out-loud funny, raising questions about semiotics, fiction, memory and power (including his own as an artist) (Tan in

Cobby, 2014). He was at a sage on stage – and a jester, albeit one that is poker-faced, suited and bespectacled.

In my performance-lectures, meaning (within and between each slide) and audience participation, interpretation and experience are key. Each slide and the accompanying spoken words are scripted and timed, and land with punchlines or punches. My slides are image-centred, and typically contain words too. The images may include images from the news or my own or others' artwork. The text may include scholarly citations and captions for images, or questions and provocations, but are treated as visual elements within each slide, akin to a picture, map or poster. In other words, the slideshows are ordered visually, which is how I order my world as a dyslexic, visual thinker, and can thus also be more accessible for students who are think visually, which is common in neurodivergent people (Grant, 2010). Contrasts – not continuity – govern these PowerPoints, as if to undermine its own authority. Nothing is at face-value. Audiences – including learners – must stay alert and active, thus engaging in higher order learning and creative thinking, recalling and applying theories and concepts. The slideshows are user-unfriendly, as they self-reflexively segue, employ jarring colours and contradict themselves. Jokes, in-jokes and meta-jokes abound: within and between the slides are tricks including wordplay, puns (as also hinted in the title of this paper), visual puns, image-within-image, juxtaposition, jump cuts, subtexts, simulacra, layering and palimpsests.

In the last 16 years, I have created around 100 different performance-lectures. PowerPoint's blandness allows me to use it to respond quickly to issues and concepts, including around urban alienation (Tan, 2015) and UK's hostile immigration policy (Tan, 2018). In recent years, I would upload the slideshows, scripts, recordings onto Issuu, Academia and Vimeo, to widen access. With Covid-19, the rhetoric of 'we're all in this together' set against the live horror spectacle of its impacts on marginalised groups, fortified my campaign for equality (or rather, equity), (neuro)diversity and inclusion. Through 7 new commissioned performance-lectures between March-July, I launched critiques against disciplinary silos (2020a) and performative-allyship, in response to the 'Blackout Tuesday' farce (Figure 5). To suit online audiences, I now keep my presentations short (5-10 minutes instead of 20-90 minutes), and have reduced the number of slides (from often 200 within a given presentation, to no more than 15).

However, I have not compromised the messages. Or the cheesy jokes.

Figure 5: Two slides from This is Not an Ally (Tan, 2020c)



Source of images from left to right: Magritte (1929); Malevich (1913)

6. A Powerful Moment – or Another Missed Opportunity?

This paper outlines an example of a visual-led approach to the learning and teaching of complex issues could look like for a short online synchronous session, using PowerPoint. My example of the performance-lecture incorporates tactics from performance art, activism and film, to raise questions around power and inequality in an engaging manner, and seeks to empower learners as active

participants, including those who may be neurodivergent, or are visual thinkers (Figure 6). Inclusive pedagogy and the role of irony in learning and teaching are yet other key elements to add to this discussion. I have not had the time in this paper, but welcome others to do so.

My example can be added to MML toolkits and yet other examples that HE colleagues can use or are using to facilitate higher order learning and creative thinking. Admirable examples of these include Visual Minutes (www.morethanminutes.co.uk/visual-minutes), where artists create beautiful visual-centred maps that document, interpret, sharpen and make academic concepts accessible, from academic conferences, and a new animation All in the Same Boat (Build Back Better, 2020) which explains how Covid-19 impacts social, environmental and health injustices.

Covid-19 and BLM present a powerful moment for HE to address issues and embrace steps to radically diversify learning and teaching, including embracing the visual – but will it grab it? The pandemic has accelerated digital migration (Kosciejew, 2020) while sharpening the digital divide (Buchholz et al., 2020), make HE to re-evaluate its norms (e.g. Buchholz et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2020) or encourage creative learning and teaching initiatives: for example, as documented in mailing list JISCMail 2020, itself an example of technology-enabled solidarity. HE can, and must, do better, amid a profoundly unequal socio-political reality, which HE is situated within, and is responsible for, and which issues such as racism abound that it must address and not avoid. Multimedia learning and visual tools present creative tools to help this culture change. As a simple yet versatile and responsive format, a PowerPoint performance-lecture is well-suited for an online interface, by learners and teachers with reduced resources, and to raise questions around difficult topics. I welcome feedback and challenges, and call for the creation of yet more playful, innovative visual-led approaches in HE to encourage reflecting, opening up and sharing, and to provide the learner with insights into complex situations and the understanding of self and others.

Figure 6: Final slide from 2050 (Tan 2020d)



The background artwork was created by the author from photographs of a soft toy taken by the author, while the cropped photo was taken by the crew of #MagicCarpet (Tan 2017).

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